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SUBJECT: GEORGIAN REACTIONS TO THE MEDVEDEV-YUSHCHENKO  
MESSAGE

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1. (U) Summary: Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's August 11, 2009, letter and accompanying video address (available widely on the internet) to Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko has dominated Georgian headlines and raised questions about Moscow's intentions. In the letter, Medvedev specifically criticizes Yushchenko's Georgia policy and cites it as one of several reasons for a recent souring of relations between Russia and Ukraine. Georgian government officials and political analysts publicly interpreted the letter as evidence of Russia's desire to weaken Yushchenko's domestic position ahead of Ukraine's January 2010 presidential elections. They also viewed the letter as a warning or bluff, saying that Russian military aggression against Ukraine seems unlikely, but nonetheless urged the West to pay attention to the Kremlin's actions. Georgian political analyst Soso Tsiskarishvili considered the decision to air Medvedev's video message from the Black Sea town of Sochi as "a warning that if (Ukraine) continues with its current policy, it may have trouble in Crimea just like Georgia had in Abkhazia and South Ossetia." End Summary.

GEORGIA UNSURPRISED, BUT WARY OF MORE TENSION IN THE  
NEIGHBORHOOD

2. (U) Georgian government officials and political analysts remained publicly unsurprised by Medvedev's tone and unconvinced that Russia intends to carry out large-scale aggression against Ukraine at this stage. Many speculated on Georgian news programs that Medvedev aims to lower Yushchenko's popularity rating ahead of Ukraine's January 2010 presidential elections in hopes that a pro-Russia candidate will instead take office. Although most officials and analysts interpreted the letter as little more than a verbal threat or bluff, they nonetheless cautioned the West not to dismiss Moscow's actions.

3. (U) Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandre Nalbandov told the press that the Georgian MFA is "worried" by the state of relations between Ukraine and Russia, commenting that "it seems that Russia has lost any kind of ability to conduct civilized negotiations." Nalbandov stated that the letter does not necessarily mean that military conflict between Russia and Ukraine is possible, but cautioned that "when one talks about Russia no scenario can be excluded, and that means the international community should pay proper attention to the steps of the Kremlin."

4. (U) Vice Prime Minister and State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration Issues Giorgi Baramidze told Rustavi 2 TV that "Russia continues its imperialistic policy and Ukraine is now a target" since Russia wants to "stir

tensions there ahead of presidential elections." Baramidze explained that "(w)hat happened last August in Georgia was not simply Russia's whim and it did not happen because, as our opponent say, we made mistakes. This was a well-planned strategy... as Russia wants to restore its empire. There is no direct threat of war now, but Russia tries to lead the processes towards internal tensions in Ukraine. Russia is not capable to engage in direct military confrontation with Ukraine. Russia could even hardly deal with us (in last year's war). I do not think this (letter) is a preparation for war with Ukraine; they are simply preparing ground inside Ukraine to stir internal confrontation there."

15. (U) Analyst Tsiskarishvili told a local English-language daily newspaper that the letter was "a rude intervention in Qdaily newspaper that the letter was "a rude intervention in the internal affairs of Ukraine" and interpreted the decision to film Medvedev's address in Sochi as "a warning that if (Ukraine) continues with its current policy, it may have trouble in Crimea just like Georgia had in Abkhazia and South Ossetia." Tsiskarishvili explained that Moscow intends "to kill several birds with one stone". Tsiskarishvili continued saying that "(w)ith this letter Medvedev also addresses the West and shows that he is not going to consider their opinion. Especially it is important for the USA, because it shows that no 'restart' (in US-Russian relations) can be conducted if it means Russia loses control over the ex-Soviet republics. Medvedev is also showing his support for the Russian population in Ukraine and Russian Crimean residents, saying almost openly that Russia will defend its interests in these areas, and the letter is an attempt to apply pressure on Ukrainian society just before the elections. Criticizing Ukraine's support of Georgia last August is just a part of this. This letter will be a new headache and a new challenge for the West, however it should not be left without a proper answer, because in this case it will be impossible to stop Russia's imperial ambitions, and the situation in (Georgian breakaway regions of) Abkhazia and South Ossetia could easily be repeated in the Ukrainian Crimea."

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